

Arbitration

1525 words

“We’re a couple of idiots,” Sam said as the plane taxied to the gate, everything wet out there. “Who goes to San Francisco for a tennis vacation?”

“It’s a camp, don’t forget,” Wendy said. “You saw the website, they have 12 indoor courts. Let’s don’t spoil it before it even starts. Please.”

This was why Sam didn’t particularly care for Wendy. She talked him into stuff, and her judgment was awful, and if the thing went south it was somehow him that screwed it up.

They checked into a motor inn on Lombard Street, but nowhere near the famous, *hilly* Lombard Street apparently, more like Saw Mill Boulevard that they just came from in Pittsburgh, heavy traffic both directions and a steady hum, which the room didn’t do a good enough job blocking out.

“Not sure I should ask,” Sam said, “but how’d you maneuver *this* place?”

“Again, we need to lighten up and take a deep breath,” Wendy said. “It’s part of the package deal.

There were a few lodging options, this fit our budget . . . Can we just have a good time, is that too much to ask?”

Sam said, “I’m going downstairs.”

He checked out the pool, little backyard kidney-shaped job being pelted by raindrops. No jacuzzi spa that could he see, which was a basic foundation of any vacation. He thumbed through the tourist pamphlets in the office, and the clerk was perfectly friendly, but the curry smell coming from a back room drove him out of there.

Wendy had showered and was sitting on her towel on the edge of the bed, talking on the phone, not wearing anything. *Ellen* was on, and without looking away from the TV Wendy raised a finger, telling Sam not to interrupt her. It was clear from the conversation she was chatting with her sister Hazel, which happened pretty much every day.

Sam stood there and took a little inventory. It was interesting, she never sat around naked at home. He had to admit her figure was still pretty damn good, everything reasonably tight. Her breasts had lowered somewhat, but the mass and projection continued to be impressive, and she still got looks on the street when she wore certain outfits.

There was a regional manager he worked with years ago, when they were doing a reno on a Carl's Junior, who had a spectacular body but whose odd facial expression turned him off. Same thing for the most part with Wendy and her attitude, unfortunately.

The rain let up and they had dinner at a bistro on Russian Hill that they'd gotten from the in-flight magazine, and they rode the cable car down to Ghirardelli Square. They walked over to Aquatic Park and you could see the bridge lit up orange and patches of lights across the bay. Sam said, "Just to satisfy my own curiosity . . . you enjoy it when other guys check you out?"

Wendy crinkled up her face. "For God sake's," she said. "And you've asked me this before."

"I have?"

"What exactly is your problem, Sam?"

"I don't think it's a problem. I'd be intrigued if the answer was yes, is all."

"Okay . . . the honest truth? I love it . . . Sometimes I even want to *fuck* the person who's staring at me."

"Wow . . . except for the being serious part."

"What do *you* think? But that's what you want to hear, so there you have it . . . What you need, and I

mean it, is to get yourself out of the gutter. You'll go further if you do."

"Really . . . Well hey, I work hard, in case you weren't aware of it . . . Didn't realize I have to watch what I think or talk about on my own time." Sam had a plumbing and heating business, three employees, though one of them, his best worker, was an illegal from Central America, which Wendy didn't approve of. She was an executive recruiter, on the road 10 days a month, and earned more than he did.

"Not your time, *our* time," she said. "Thanks a lot, if that's how you see it."

Sam put his arm around her and she half-responded and he suggested they forget a cab and walk back, maybe stop for a nightcap along the way. Wendy said that would sound okay, if they didn't have to get up early for the tennis camp.

"Jesus," Sam said, "we're going to hit a few balls around. Some guy saying 'Nice job Mr. Koziel, just a little looser in the grip if you can' . . . We're not winning Wimbledon."

"This program has a lot more to it," Wendy said. "Wellness sessions, yoga, nutrition. Why come all the way here if we're not prepared?"

Sam didn't argue. They found a taxi and were back at the motel in 10 minutes, and before she took off her coat Wendy had pulled out her phone and was texting.

Sam was thirsty. He said he was going to look for some club soda, and he'd be back in a few minutes.

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There seemed to be more action on the other side of Lombard, so he crossed over. It was a young person's neighborhood, noisy bars and lively restaurants with people eating at tables on the sidewalk under these tall heating lamps. A block down was Chestnut Street which felt like the center of things, and he went into Peet's Coffee and ordered an espresso.

It was crowded, full of 20-something kids, most of them on devices, and there was nowhere to sit, so he stood at the little counter where you added milk and sugar to your concoction. There was part of a newspaper laying around, green, the sports section, apparently how they did it out here, and he started reading the front page.

Someone said, "You're wondering the same thing as me, right?"

Sam looked up and a young gal was smiling. Her hair was streaked funny, and one arm was tattooed from her wrist to her shoulder, while the other one wasn't.

"Sorry, what same thing?" Sam said.

"Did we improve ourselves enough in the off-season. The Giants . . . I mean we start off last year, we have the best record. Then after the All Star Game we collapse."

Sam was trying to keep his teams and years straight. "Hold on, you made the playoffs though, didn't you?"

"Technically yes, but we limped in . . . You're not a Giants fan then."

Sam said he wasn't, sorry about that, he was from out of town.

"That's cool," she said. "What are you doing here?"

"It's . . . kind of an adult tennis camp that my wife found. She's pretty good, I'm just a hacker. The thought was to combine it with a visit to sunny California."

"Well that would be more LA," the girl said. "Better yet Palm Springs, and even better, Arizona. Spring Training's going on."

"Something I always wanted to do," he said.

"Oh, Spring Training is so much fun!" she said. "My dad used to take us every year for a while . . . Then my parents split up."

“Ah Jeez. Sorry.”

“It’s fine . . . Well, enjoy your tennis thing.” And she threw on her backpack and was gone.

Sam put the newspaper into a recycling basket and took his time finishing the espresso.

Years ago he umpired American Legion ball in Scranton. The level of play was strong, there were often scouts in the stands, and every year kids were recruited by Division 1 schools, and a few were drafted by major league clubs. You had rabid parents at these games, and once a father followed him to the parking lot, challenging a call on a tag play at the plate. The guy put his hand on Sam, and out of fear more than anything else, Sam swung and decked him.

It took a while before the man was able to get up, and by that time several parents and players were watching, including the guy’s son, who was crying. Not too long afterward Sam ran into the son and the mom at the hardware store, and he wanted to say something but he didn’t, and he kicked himself for it, even though what would you say?

He rooted for the kid after that, trying to keep an eye on his progress. The kid graduated and went out of state to play, at a JC in Texas, which Sam felt good

about, but he later heard there was a drug situation on a road trip and the kid got thrown off the team and expelled.

Sam wasn't sure why he thought of all this just now, but it was what it was.

He checked his phone. It was 9:42. Nothing viable from SFO at this hour, it didn't look like . . . but there was a late flight from Oakland to Phoenix.

He ordered a large black coffee to go, added a gooey cinnamon bun for good measure, went outside, and waited for the Uber driver.